United Nations E/2001/91

Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
19 June 2001

Original: English

Substantive session of 2001
Geneva, 2-27 July 2001
Items 4 and 6 of the provisional agenda*

Coordination of the policies and activities of the specialized agencies and other bodies of the United Nations system related to the following theme: the role of the United Nations in promoting development, particularly with respect to access to and transfer of knowledge and technology, especially information and communication technologies, inter alia, through partnerships with relevant stakeholders, including the private sector

Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits

Progress report on the implementation of the ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the substantive session of 2000 of the Council

Report by the Secretary-General

1. The present report responds to the mandate contained in the ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the substantive session of the Economic and Social Council for the year 2000, entitled "Development and international cooperation in the twenty-first century: the role of information technology in the context of a knowledge-based global economy".[1] The Council requested the Secretary-General to initiate, on an urgent and priority basis, all necessary steps to implement the declaration, and to submit a progress report to the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 2001. The report also meets the mandate of Council decision 2001/210, in which the Council requested the Secretary-General to submit a report on the implementation of its decision to establish an Information and Communication Technologies Task Force.

2. The ministerial declaration formulated a broad array of policies and actions, at the national and international levels and on the part of the United Nations system, that are needed to bring information and communication technologies (ICT) to the service of development. The report of the Secretary-General on the role of the United Nations in promoting development, particularly with respect to access to and transfer of knowledge and technology, especially information and communication technologies, inter alia, through partnerships with relevant stakeholders, including the private sector (E/2001/59), which is before the Council at the coordination segment of its substantive session of 2001, addresses many of the

* E/2001/100.

01-41709 (E) 260601

important issues raised by the declaration and should thus be read in conjunction with the present report.

3. The Council, in its ministerial declaration, also noted that it should review the mandates and activities of its subsidiary bodies dealing with ICT with a view to establishing modalities to provide the United Nations and Governments with comprehensive, practical and action-oriented advice on policies and programmes and on new developments in the field of ICT for development. To facilitate the Council's review, the report of the Secretary-General on the subsidiary bodies of the Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly in the economic, social and related fields (E/2001/INF/3) has been updated to reflect the current mandates and activities of the Council's subsidiary machinery.

4. One of the major practical steps initiated by the Council to follow up the declaration was to call for the establishment of an Information and Communication Technologies Task Force (see resolution 2000/29). Under this initiative, the United Nations was to lend a truly global dimension to efforts to bridge the global digital divide, foster digital opportunity and thus firmly put ICT in the service of development for all. The objective of the proposed Task Force was to provide overall leadership to the United Nations role in helping to formulate strategies for the development of information and communication technologies and putting those technologies at the service of development and, on the basis of consultations with all stakeholders and Member States, forging a strategic partnership between the United Nations system, private industry and financing trusts and foundations, donors, programme countries and other relevant stakeholders. The Council requested the Secretary-General to undertake consultations with all stakeholders and Member States regarding the composition, governance structure, mandate, terms of reference, secretarial support and project implementation arrangements of the Task Force.

5. In the United Nations Millennium Declaration, the General Assembly endorsed the recommendations contained in the ministerial declaration of the Council and resolved to ensure that the benefits of new technologies, especially information and communication technologies, are available to all.

6. As a follow-up to the ministerial declaration as endorsed by the Millennium Summit and in accordance with Council resolution 2000/29, the Secretary-General initiated a worldwide consultation process to obtain the views of Governments, the private sector and other stakeholders on the establishment of an ICT Task Force. In this context, a group of high-level advisers to the Secretary-General was designated to assist him in conducting the consultations, and a note verbale was addressed to all Member States to elicit views and suggestions on the implementation of Council resolutions regarding ICT for development.

7. The major conclusion from the consultations conducted in October-December 2000 and from written responses from Member States and United Nations organizations was that the initiative to establish an ICT Task Force was considered to be very timely and enjoyed broad support, including by the private sector. It was repeatedly stressed that an endeavour of this magnitude and importance, predicated on genuine partnership of diverse stakeholders from both developed and developing countries, needed to be spearheaded by an "honest broker", and that the Secretary-General's role in this regard was indispensable. It was also emphasized that while the United Nations umbrella was critical, the Task Force should have functional autonomy. The outcome of these consultations was contained in a report of the advisory group that was formally presented to the Secretary-General in late February 2001.

8. On the basis of the report of the advisory group, a report of the Secretary-General (E/2001/7) was prepared and submitted to the Council for consideration at its resumed organizational session, in March 2001. The report addressed such key issues as the role of the Task Force, its overall objectives and general strategic framework. It also outlined the basic modalities of the Task Force's activity, principles of composition and secretariat support, as well as the proposed duration of the mandate and funding mechanisms. On 13 March 2001, the Council approved the recommendations contained in the report of the Secretary-General in its decision, in which it requested the Secretary-General to undertake the necessary steps to establish the ICT Task Force, in consultation with the regional groups, as recommended in the above-mentioned report and taking into account the views expressed by Member States.

9. In fulfilling this mandate, the Secretary-General, following consultations with the regional groups and in accordance with the recommendations contained in his

report (E/2001/7) as approved by the Council, is taking the necessary steps for the establishment of the Task Force. The first among these is the composition of the Task Force, which is in the process of being finalized. A panel of advisers to the Task Force will be constituted to serve as a roster of expertise available in carrying out its work.

10. In early May 2001, a small working-level advisory group helped develop a preliminary draft plan of action that the Task Force considered at a working-level informal meeting in mid-June 2001. The first formal meeting of the Task Force is planned for September 2001, at which the Task Force is expected to adopt its plan of action and its implementation modalities. A small core secretariat funded from voluntary contributions to provide the secretariat support to the Task Force will need to be established prior to the launching of the Task Force in September 2001.

11. The ICT Task Force, an important innovative public-private partnership being created under the United Nations umbrella, is the first instance of a body created by an intergovernmental decision in which Member States, the private sector and other stakeholders will participate as equal partners. Bringing all stakeholders together in a coherent, complementary and synergistic endeavour constitutes a major step towards effective harnessing of the potential of ICT for development for all and thus implementing the goals of the United Nations Millennium Declaration.

12. However, for this innovative and strategic partnership to be credible, it must be able to show early and tangible results towards bridging the digital divide. While the Task Force is not expected to be an operational or executing body, its success will depend to a considerable extent on the resources that it can help to mobilize in support of its objectives. Funding will also be needed to support the functioning of the Task Force itself and for its core secretariat. A fund-raising effort will thus need to be undertaken in the next few months to secure a sound basis for the launching of the Task Force and its plan of action.

Notes

[1] See *Official Records of the General Assembly, Fifty-fifth Session, Supplement No. 3* (A/55/3), chap. III, para. 17.